Can WinMo 7 Give Microsoft New Mobile Moxie?

By Erika Morphy
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Microsoft has been in the mobile software game for years, but lately it's been dogged by rivals like Apple, Google and RIM. Critics say recent advances in Windows Mobile have been superficial and evolutionary. Microsoft will reportedly demo its next-generation mobile OS -- Windows Mobile 7 -- next month. What does WinMo need to get the wind back in its sails?

Microsoft (Nasdaq: MSFT) is readying a push to revitalize its Windows mobile operating system. The company will Windows Mobile 7 at next month's Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain, according to Cnet.

Windows Mobile 7 has been billed as a major revamp of Redmond's mobile OS. The source code, which is undergoing a complete rewrite, will reportedly be finalized over the summer in time for a rollout this fall.

The company is also said to be working on a new consumer phone under the Sidekick product line.

A request for comment to Microsoft was not returned in time for publication.

About Time

While Microsoft has been building software for PDAs and smartphones for several years, rivals like Research In Motion (Nasdaq: RIMM), Apple (Nasdaq: AAPL) and Google (Nasdaq: GOOG) have more recently presented an increased degree of competition. Meanwhile, Microsoft hasn't offered up a real breakthrough for years, according to Patrick Gilbert, president and CEO of 4SmartPhone.

"Microsoft has been nothing but evolutionary as far as its development of Windows Mobile has gone," he told TechNewsWorld.

Windows Mobile 5, introduced several years ago, "was something of a departure from the previous OS. But everything in between those versions and the current one has been nothing but incremental evolution. To this day I can still see shades of version 5 in Windows Mobile."

The only advances in the platform have come from Microsoft's partners' initiative, he added, pointing to the user interface developed by HTC. "Hopefully Microsoft has gotten some ideas from that," Gilbert concluded.

Recent updates to the Windows Mobile platform have failed to keep apace with what rivals are offering, according to Azita Arvani, principal and founder of Arvani Group.

"While other mobile operating systems like iPhone OS, Android and webOS have taken great strides in innovation and functionality in the last 12 months, Windows Mobile has done very little to get excited about," she told the TechNewsWorld, singling out Windows Mobile's user interface as an example. "While the entire world is going towards intuitive visual user interfaces, WinMo 6.5 is offering a text-based list interface as its home page. What were they thinking?"

New Game

With buzz building, the pressure is even greater for Microsoft -- which has already been under enormous pressure from advances made by the iPhone and Android.

In particular, Apple' formidable array of mobile apps -- followed by a sizable number of apps for the Android platform -- is proving to be a serious competitive factor.

The emergence of centralized, heavily promoted application storefronts like Apple's App Store can be credited at least in part with moving smartphones into the mainstream. Many people have had phones with smartphone capabilities for years -- like the Nokia (NYSE: NOK) Series 60 phones popular in Europe, for example -- they just never used them as smartphones because it was not convenient, said Denis Margolin, DataArt's mobile practice leader.

"Technology advances, including the apps, have made it possible to create products and mobile services that people other than IT professionals could benefit from -- such as navigation, messaging, geographical search, Internet access and others, without having a steep learning curve or paying heavily for the data transfer," he told TechNewsWorld.

Bar Set High

Indeed, given the leaps and bounds by which the mobile space is growing, this could be Microsoft's last chance to make a splash with Windows Mobile.

"They'd better dazzle us with WinMo 7, because the bar has been set pretty high by the competition," Arvani warned. "The mobile world has changed dramatically since WinMo first came out. And Microsoft must realize that they can't just make incremental improvements like their desktop OS model. This is time for radical innovation."

Even if Windows Mobile 7 is a winner, more will have to be done for it to truly compete, she added. "They also need to get it on the right phones, cultivate a dynamic development community and offer a broad set of compelling mobile applications. They have fallen behind on many fronts." ECT